

VZCZCXRO1002
RR RUEHMA RUEHPA
DE RUEHNM #0453 1201503
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 291503Z APR 08
FM AMEMBASSY NIAMEY
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 4273
INFO RUEHZK/ECOWAS COLLECTIVE
RUEHLMC/MCC WASHDC
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 0671

UNCLAS NIAMEY 000453

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR AF/W DENNISON, AF/RSA HARPOLE AND AF/PDPA LISEBY

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [KCOR](#) [KPAO](#) [NG](#)

SUBJECT: GON closes second radio station

REF: (a) 06 Niamey 1088; (b) Niamey 318

¶1. (U) Summary: On April 22, 2008, the Conseil Superieur de la Communication (CSC), Niger's media regulatory body, ordered the indefinite closure of Agadez-based radio station Sahara FM. In its official report, the CSC indicates that this decision was made "without ruling out possible criminal charges." This closing follows the three-month suspension of Radio France International's (RFI) local broadcast in March 2008 (ref b). End Summary.

¶2. (U) On April 18, the CSC summoned Raliou Hamed-Assaleh, the Sahara FM station manager, to Niamey for allegedly inciting ethnic hatred and attempting to undermine the army's morale, after both the Agadez governor and police commissioner complained about the broadcasting of "dangerous" testimonies of people living in the region.

¶3. (U) In a meeting with CSC officials on April 21, Hamed-Assaleh was informed that Sahara FM had committed two infractions: broadcasting the inflammatory interviews of the allegedly mistreated individuals, which could incite ethnic violence; and using a non-authorized frequency.

¶4. (SBU) The latter, a technical violation resulting from the recent sale of Sahara FM, was cited as the reason for the station's closure. According to the CSC, when a radio station is sold, ownership of the frequency does not automatically transfer. Instead the new owner must request authorization from the CSC to continue broadcasting on that frequency.

¶5. (SBU) On April 22 the CSC announced the indefinite closure of Sahara FM and also indicated that their reporting could result in potential criminal charges. [Comment: while certainly disturbing, the seriousness of this threat remains unclear, as the CSC can only call for, but not apply, criminal sanctions. However, these statements in and of themselves further weaken the GON's oft-stated claim that the CSC is an independent body operating outside government influence. End comment.]

¶6. (U) The current owner of Sahara FM is Mamane Abou, the owner/publisher of private newspaper "Le Republicain." In 2006 Abou and his editor-in-chief Oumarou Keita were jailed on charges of disseminating false news in an article alleging the prime minister's attempt to shift Niger's foreign policy toward non-western countries. It is commonly believed that the true motive was to muzzle the two journalists for their reporting on official corruption (ref a).

¶7. (SBU) In a recent edition, Le Republicain published photos of Nigeriens in the Agadez region who had allegedly been tortured at the hands of the armed forces. Agadez-based private newspaper Air Info published equally troubling articles. To date there has been no similar CSC action against these publications. [Comment: Post

believes that the location (Agadez) and medium (radio) played an important role in the CSC decision to shutter Sahara FM, as radio has the capacity to reach a much larger audience than the print press in Niger, where illiteracy rates are high. Also, the technical violation cited provides a legal pretext, which allows the CSC to refute claims it closed the station based solely on its reporting. End comment.]

ALLEN